

THE 'WAL-MART' CONSTITUENCY

Democrats to focus on low-income, single women

By Susan Milligan, Globe Staff | July 27, 2004

Democrats are planning an aggressive campaign to attract female voters, particularly "Wal-Mart women" party officials say are unregistered, overwhelmed by their own day-to-day financial struggles, and prone to feel their votes may not make a difference in their lives.

"These are women in low-wage jobs, women who never would be able to scrounge up a security deposit for an apartment," said US Representative Louise Slaughter of New York, who chairs the Democratic women's caucus in the House. "I want to go to West Virginia and say to these women, 'Don't worry about your gun. Tell your husband you care about education, about health care.' "

The 42 female House Democrats plan to fan out around the country after the party's nominating convention ends Thursday and head to battleground states to register women. Slaughter said the congresswomen would try to convince them that, referring to President Bush's middle initial, " 'W' may stand for war; 'W' may stand for waste, 'W' may stand for wealth. But 'W' doesn't stand for women."

The presumptive Democratic nominee, John F. Kerry of Massachusetts, has long benefited from a gender gap showing women favor him over Bush. But many women -- some 22 million, according to House minority leader Nancy Pelosi of California -- do not vote, and 6 million of them are not even registered.

A poll released yesterday by Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner Research indicates that unmarried women are less likely to approve of Bush. The research, based on the group's own polling and an analysis of other polls, shows that 38 percent of single, divorced, and widowed women approve or strongly approve of his performance in office, compared with 48 percent for the total electorate.

Kerry leads Bush, 60 percent to 31 percent, among all unmarried women, the study said. But Kerry trails Bush among white married women, 49 percent to 46 percent, and may have less support among single women in states where independent Ralph Nader is in the race. Unmarried women are more likely than the rest of the electorate to back Nader, giving the consumer advocate seven percent of their support, compared to five percent for the total voting population.

The task, Democratic lawmakers said, is identifying these women and getting them to vote.

Candidates have often focused on the "soccer moms," middle class mothers who tend to be concerned about their family's security, said Sylvia Larsen, the Democratic leader in New Hampshire's Senate. Democrats need to expand their campaign to attract less affluent women, including single mothers and low-wage earners who work and shop in discount stores, she said.

"We're talking about discussing these matters with women working at Wal-Mart, or at the hairdresser," Larsen said before heading off to a women's reception billed as a "low-CARB lunch." "That means no Cheney, no Ashcroft, no Rumsfeld, no Bush, and definitely no Rice," Larsen said, referring to top Bush administration officials.

Democratic women say they must go directly to the places where "Wal-Mart women" work and parent -- discount stores, after PTA meetings, in parks where they take their children to play.

The Bush-Cheney campaign has made its own appeal to female voters, lambasting Kerry for voting against "Laci's law," which passed earlier this year and made it a separate crime to harm or kill a fetus during an assault on a pregnant woman. Some fear the measure would erode abortion rights because it would consider a fetus to be a separate individual under federal law.

A Bush-Cheney television ad hits heavily on a family theme, featuring children boarding a school bus or playing near a suburban home porch while the voice-over denounces Kerry for voting against a bill that would have required parental notification before a girl could get an abortion. "When it comes to issues that affect families, are John Kerry's priorities yours?" the ad asks.

Democrats say they do not worry about losing more female voters to Bush, but about persuading women to actually cast ballots. A typical low-income woman -- especially a single mother -- may have little faith in the system and little patience for the task of registering to vote and getting to the polls, Democratic officials say. These women may be so "stressed" at the end of a day of feeding their children, getting them to school, and making it to work on time that voting seems like too much trouble for an uncertain return, said Denise King, a Democratic delegate from upstate New York who is a teacher.

"They're intimidated," said Martha Fuller Clark, a New Hampshire Democrat who ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 2002. "They don't believe they have an impact." But such women could make the difference for Kerry in November if they are motivated to vote, she said. "They have to feel comfortable with the candidate, and . . . the process," she said. ■